

CHICKEN RIGGIES

Serves 6 to 8.

By Dennis W. Viau; modified from a dozen recipes.

Virtually unknown outside of Utica, New York, this dish is a variation of the many Italian-American versions of macaroni and sauce. This is made with chicken breast and roasted peppers for a Southern Italian, Sicilian flavor. The name comes from rigatoni, the pasta used in this meal. The dish's popularity led to an annual cook-off, Riggiefest. The best way to make this is with the freshest ingredients.



Ingredients:

2 tablespoons butter (more as needed)
2 tablespoons pure or cooking olive oil (save the extra virgin for flavoring later) (more as needed)
4 ounces (113g) fresh mushrooms; sliced (cremini are customary, but shiitake are good too).
4 to 5 shallots (about 2 ounces/57g); thinly sliced
4 to 5 cloves garlic; minced or crushed with a garlic press
1 cup (237ml) chicken stock, preferably homemade
3 chicken breasts; cubed into ¾-inch (2cm) morsels
2 to 3 fresh variety of peppers, such as bell peppers, green, gold, and red
1 or 2 fresh Anaheim chillies (these are sweet; substitute hot, such as jalapeño, if desired)
1 pound (454g) rigatoni pasta
¼ cup (59ml) Marsala (or dry sherry or dry white wine)
½ teaspoon smoked paprika
¼ teaspoon ground red pepper or ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes (I substituted 2 tablespoons chorizo)
2 anchovy fillets (optional)
2 cups (about ½ liter) marinara; preferably homemade
½ cup (118ml) heavy cream
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1 chicken breast; cut into long strips
¼ cup (59ml) extra virgin olive oil

Optional for garnish (any combination of the following):

Black olives or other variety; sliced
Chopped fresh parsley
Fresh basil, about 6 leaves; chopped or cut into chiffonade
Freshly grated Parmesan or Romano cheese

Directions:

Heat the oil and butter in a skillet and sauté the mushrooms until tender and slightly browned. Remove from the pan and set aside. Sauté the shallots until lightly caramelized, 5 to 6 minutes, adding more fat to the skillet if necessary. Add the minced garlic. Cook 1 minute. Then remove from the heat and set aside.

Heat chicken stock in a heavy saucepan until boiling. Lower the heat and simmer until reduced to about half its original volume. Add the cubed chicken, bring to a boil, cover, and cook the chicken only until it begins to look thoroughly cooked. Cover the pan and remove from the heat. Set aside.

Slice peppers into long strips, discarding the seeds and white membrane. Sear on a hot griddle (500°F/260°C) to add dark bar marks (black marks will add a smoky flavor) or roast in the oven until tender and lightly browned. Let cool, then chop into ¾-inch (2cm) pieces. Set aside.

Remove the chicken from the stock and set aside. Heat stock with Marsala, paprika, red pepper (or chorizo), and anchovy fillets to boiling and simmer to reduce to a slightly thickened sauce. Add the marinara and all the cooked ingredients. Heat thoroughly and remove from the heat. Stir in the heavy cream. Mix well. Cover and keep warm. (Can be made a day in advance.)

Boil the rigatoni according to package directions, until *al dente*. Drain and return to the pot. Dress with a little olive oil or butter.

While the pasta is boiling, grill the chicken strips on a hot (500°F/260°C) cast iron stove top griddle (or in a hot skillet) to brown with bar marks. Turn and cook the other side only until thoroughly cooked without overcooking. The chicken strips could also be browned under a broiler. Do not overcook.

Plate the cooked pasta (either individual servings or in one large bowl) and ladle the sauce mixture over the top. Drizzle the extra virgin olive oil on top. Garnish with any combination of the garnish ingredients above. Place 1 or 2 grilled strips of chicken breast along one side. Serve immediately.

STEP-BY-STEP

1



The ingredient list is a little extensive, but this makes a rich sauce full of flavors. My homemade marinara was a sauce I made with roasted fresh Roma tomatoes and then stored in the freezer. See my recipe for *Ravioli with Roast Tomato Sauce* on my web site.

2



Heat butter and oil in a skillet and sauté the sliced mushrooms until tender and slightly browned. Remove from the pan and set aside.

3



Add the sliced shallots to the pan (and more oil if needed) and sauté until lightly caramelized, 8 to 10 minutes. Then add the minced garlic and cook an additional minute. Remove from the heat and set aside.

4



I make my own chicken stock and store it as 1-cup blocks in the freezer. Heat the chicken stock in a heavy saucepan and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer to concentrate until the volume is reduced to about half. You can substitute good quality store-bought chicken stock or broth.

5



Add the cubed chicken to the stock. Increase the heat and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and cook the chicken only until it begins to look like it might be cooked through. Remove from the heat, cover the pan, and set aside. The residual heat in the pan will finish cooking the chicken and it will be melt-in-your-mouth tender. Chicken breast becomes tough and chewy when overcooked. Cooking it only until it is cooked through will give it a tender texture.

6



Cut the top from the peppers and remove the seeds and white membranes. Then slice into strips. In my sauce I used slightly more than half the gold and red pepper, but I used all the Anaheim chilly. Anaheims are sweet chillies. If you prefer a hotter flavor, you can use jalapeño or other hot chili pepper(s). I prefer mild and sweet chillies.

7



I grilled my peppers on a hot cast iron stove top grill to give them bar marks. You could brown them in a hot skillet or roast them in the oven until tender and lightly browned. Some cooks pierce them with a fork and hold them over the open flame of the stove. The slight blackening will add a smoky flavor to the sauce.

8



Remove the cooked chicken from the stock and set aside. Here, also, are my grilled peppers.

9



Chop the grilled peppers into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch (2cm) pieces.

10



To build the sauce, add the Marsala, paprika, red pepper (or chorizo*), and anchovy fillets (optional) to the chicken stock. (Although the anchovies are optional, I can't imagine making a rich sauce like this without them. They don't add a *fishy* flavor; they add depth to the flavor.) Season with freshly ground black pepper. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer to reduce the liquid down until it begins to thicken. You will boil away most of the liquid. The tender anchovies will break up and dissolve into the liquid.

*When I see a recipe that calls for ground red pepper or red pepper flakes, I often think of chorizo. I try to buy a good pork chorizo. It is available in beef and soy (for vegans) varieties. Chorizo is a highly spiced ground meat that adds exceptional flavor to many sauces, soups, or casseroles. It is typically packed in two plastic casings, which need to be removed before using.

11



Add the marinara with all the cooked ingredients and heat almost to a boil (avoiding overcooking the chicken). Taste for salt and adjust, if necessary. Remove from the heat and add the heavy cream. Stir to combine. This is ready to serve. This sauce can be made a day in advance. It will taste even better the next day.

Cook the rigatoni according to package directions, typically about 12 minutes, until *al dente*. The package I bought said, “Made with bronze plates.” Bronze plates (also called dies) give the pasta’s surface a slight “tooth” that holds more sauce than pasta made with stainless steel or plastic plates.

12



There are many ways to garnish this dish. To the left is basil cut into chiffonade (threads). You could also use chopped Italian parsley. I have pickled peppers and fresh Romano cheese to grate on top. You can use fresh Parmesan. This is the point at which you would use extra virgin olive. Sauté with pure olive oil (it has a higher smoke point) and reserve the extra virgin olive oil for flavoring. I like to drizzle it over the cooked food before serving.

13



Although you could put all 4 chicken breasts in the sauce, I set one aside to cut into strips and then grill. Season with salt and pepper before grilling. When I plated the rigatoni and sauce, I put 1 or 2 of these strips on the side of each plate for an extra piece of chicken breast.

14



Either plate as individual servings or in one large bowl for family-style serving. Drizzle extra virgin olive oil over the top of the food and then garnish as desired.

Conclusion

This sauce was incredibly delicious, rich and bold with flavor. Using only the freshest ingredients, rather than from jars and cans, makes all the difference. If I lived in Utica, New York I would enter this recipe in the Riggiefest.